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INDIGENOUS ISSUES

Written statement* submitted by North-South XXI, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[20 December 1999]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, as received from the submitting non-governmental organization.

RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

1. Despite progress within the United Nations, at both the national and international levels, efforts to restore all the rights of indigenous peoples and to adopt the draft declaration are taking a very long time. The appropriation of land by force, the expansion of private companies grabbing natural resources, the violation of basic rights - particularly the right to self-determination - and the plundering of their cultural heritage are the very problems indigenous people have endured for centuries!

2. Considerable progress in the concept of human rights, according to Western standards, has not been matched by progress in the rights of peoples. Can individuals enjoy the privileges of human rights when the rights of their people are being violated? To restore the basic rights of indigenous people and safeguard their cultural heritage cannot be likened to a charitable or folkloric undertaking. The colonial perception of indigenous peoples as barbarians and pagans who should submit to the rules of Western civilization persists in the concepts and various aspects of a supposedly modern way of thinking. The unbroken resistance of indigenous peoples and their rejection of the dominant thinking are signs of their desire to escape from the constraints imposed on them during centuries of policies that persist in one way or another and prove they existed.

3. By fighting the policy of assimilation and integration, indigenous people, like other exploited peoples, are endeavouring to come to terms with the demands of today's world. They are trying to build a society they can call their own and to approach the issue of modernity in the context of their way of life and according to their culture. The international community should be helping these peoples to build a society that matches their own concept of modernity and to develop their economies and political institutions to their full potential. This historic process is the shared responsibility of all.

4. The draft United Nations declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples would, if adopted, be a moral acknowledgement of the rights of these peoples and, at the same time, a condemnation of repression by the colonizers. But this declaration alone does not have the binding force to ensure the restoration of indigenous rights. The right to self-determination must be clearly and unambiguously established.

5. The Commission should therefore take all measures that may contribute to the advancement of indigenous peoples, including the following:

(a) Assert unambiguously the right to self-determination;

(b) Assert the right of indigenous people to live on their land, and their right to recover their lands and to establish political bodies of their own choosing there;

(c) Put an end to the policy of colonizing indigenous lands, the seizure of their natural resources, and plunder by the big multinationals and private companies;

(d) Put an end to all forms of assimilation and integration forced on indigenous populations by States. These practices, designed to weaken cultural identity, are one of the gravest dangers and violate the International Bill of Human Rights;

(e) Set up a programme whereby States undertake to guarantee the right to work of indigenous people - a third of whom are unemployed - in their respective territories;

(f) Ensure that all necessary political and legal measures are taken by the United Nations and, especially, the States concerned in fulfilment of obligations undertaken in treaties, agreements and arrangements with indigenous peoples;

(g) Establish a court within the United Nations to consider complaints by indigenous people against States or private companies which continue to ignore their rights. The judgements of this court should be enforced under United Nations supervision;

(h) Ensure that indigenous peoples have the means to protect their cultural identity and ethnic specificity and, to this end, provide generous subsidies for special programmes to promote indigenous languages and cultures. Such action should help foster one of the most important aspects of the world heritage: cultural diversity.

6. In view of the negative effects of cultural globalization, action in support of indigenous peoples is of fundamental importance. The international community has a duty to save cultures that are threatened with extinction. Diversity and pluralism are the foundations of freedom. This freedom cannot be guaranteed in a monolithic, totalitarian and globalized world. The Working Group on Indigenous Populations should study these programme guidelines and help in ensuring that the declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples is adopted urgently.